

# South Belt

# Ellington

# Leader

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## *Donna Benfiglio makes medical history*

**By Debora Waddell**

Donna Benfiglio, 31-year-old lifetime South Belt resident, made medical history by being the first American to have a Micromed DeBakey VAD™ (ventricular assist device) put in her heart. According to medical officials involved with the procedure, this medical device saved her life.

Benfiglio suffered from cardiomyopathy. Cardiomyopathy is when the heart muscle cannot function properly. Blood then begins to build up in the ventricle and fluid can form in the heart and lungs and lead to congestive heart failure. The DeBakey VAD™ assists the left ventricle to pump blood to the body. This assistance lets the heart rest while the patient is waiting for a heart transplant.

Benfiglio was officially diagnosed with cardiomyopathy when she was 25. After the diagnosis, doctors told her that she had had it all of her life. Her father died from cardiomyopathy.

The DeBakey VAD™ had been tested on 32 patients in Europe before the FDA approved its use in the United States.

This approval was two-three weeks before Benfiglio received the pump.

Benfiglio did not know much about the device before she got it. She said that she just put her trust in her doctors and technology.

"It was extremely difficult in a sense that I was making a decision to save my life with an experiment," Benfiglio said.

For Benfiglio this was a life-saving experi-

ment. The pump would have allowed her heart to rest for up to two to three months, buying her time until she could get a heart transplant. Benfiglio received her new heart sooner than she expected.

The pump was placed in her heart on June 7. She was taken back to surgery to evaluate the device and her cardiac function on June 21.

Eight hours after she came out of the surgery, on June 22, she received a heart transplant.

"It's been quite a roller coaster ride," she said. "[The pump] kept me alive. I'm thankful because my own heart would not have made it."

Benfiglio found out the day after her heart transplant that the right side of her original heart was cratered.

She reports that her recovery is going great. She has already been taken off one of the anti-rejection drugs.

"Everything's fine. My new heart is perfect. My last four biopsies have been 1A, which is perfect."

Benfiglio is taking it slow. She is making sure that she is not exposed to illnesses, especially within the first three months after her transplant.

Her story will be aired on Dateline after the Olympics and on the Discovery Health Channel on Dec. 10.

Benfiglio's future will include writing a book about her experience and getting her college degree in computer science.



South Belt resident Donna Benfiglio is shown here with her two cardiac physicians, Dr. George Noon, left and Dr. Michael DeBakey, after she was the first patient in the United States to receive the DeBakey VAD. The life-saving instrument kept Benfiglio alive until she received a new heart.

*Methodist Hospital photo*